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# The Common Core: A Solution or a Burden for Disadvantaged Students?

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### The Common Core: A solution or a burden for disadvantaged students?

In 2009, President George W. Bush spoke at the General Philip Kearny School in Philadelphia and set a goal for America's children: "every child should learn to read and do math at grade level by 2014." The dream was to become reality through continued support of The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), but as we all know too well, has not come to fruition. NCLB aimed to create reform via a top-down perspective, but the program suffered jointly from limited funding and the lack of a unified set of standards for assessing students' progress. In response to this gripe, governors and state commissioners of education from 48 of the 50 states developed the Common Core Standards. This set of standards, which has been adopted by 44 states so far, aims to standardize and reform the educational system. However, educators disagree on the effect that this policy will have on the country's failing schools. My research suggests that the implementation of the Common Core Standards could have a negative impact on disadvantaged students by requiring increases in expenditure, providing little in funding for failing schools, and failing to address the true cause of failure within the American system: unequal distribution of funds.

As briefly aforementioned, the Common Core Standards aim to provide students across the country with a unified set of learning goals, so that achievement can be tested and compared. Before the Common Core Standards, schools in different states would

produce their own tests with which to measure the success of their children. The material and rigor of these state tests would vary greatly from state to state, and because schools (especially the underperforming ones) generally teach with the test in mind, students from different states would graduate from school with different skill sets and college preparedness levels. With the Common Core, the hope is that this disparity would lessen or be more easily measurable, thus lending itself to further reform.

Many skeptics wonder whether the Common Core Standards address the root cause of underperformance in the educational system. For instance, Marion Brady, a veteran teacher and curriculum designer, argues that the Common Core fails to account for the “main reason for poor student performance... a level of childhood poverty the consequences of which no amount of schooling can effectively counter” (2012).

A study by Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling at the University of Wisconsin-Madison recently re-examined the findings of The Equality of Educational Opportunity Study. This study, published in 1966 by a team led by James S. Coleman, found “that a student’s family background is far more important than school social composition,” as cited by Borman and Dowling (2010, p.1). The unfortunate implication is that disadvantaged students are underperforming students, regardless of the school they are attending. Although new research suggests that this may not be the case and that schools have more power than previously believed, the statistics we are familiar with perpetuate this myth.

### **The Relationship Between Academic Achievement and Family Background**

Academic progress can be judged in terms of several factors, like literacy, state standardized test scores, and successful completion of schooling. The statistics suggest

that race and family income are closely correlated with underperformance in American public school children, regardless of the measure used.

The event dropout rate is a term used by researchers to estimate the percentage of high school students leaving high school without earning a high school diploma during a single school year. Though the event dropout rate among Blacks and Hispanics has been on a decline since 1995, they remain more likely to drop out than their White or Asian peers. Similarly, students living in low-income families (defined as being within the bottom quintile of all family incomes) are around five times more likely to drop out than their high-income (defined as being within the top quintile) peers. Perhaps surprisingly, gender, region, and even disability does not make much of a difference in the event dropout rate of public school students (Chapman, 2011).

The story is the much the same with literacy. Although the Central Intelligence Agency estimates that around 99% of the population over the age of fifteen can read and write, this only accounts for basic skills (CIA, 2003). During its 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed and tested 13,600 adults for proficiency in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In this study, it was found that the average proficiency difference between black and white students aged 16-18 would account for about .2 years of schooling. Hispanics are hit harder; the difference between their literary proficiency and that of whites is representative of about 1.1 years of schooling (Kirsh, 2002).

In addition, the achievement gap between the children of high income-earners and low-income earners has been widening since the 1970s. In a 2011 report for the Center for Education Policy Analysis at Stanford University, Sean Reardon (2011) found that “a

given difference in family incomes now corresponds to a 30-60% larger difference in achievement than it did for children born in the 1970s” (p.3). Reardon suggests that it’s likely that parents are investing more in children’s education at a young age, and that due to this, the amount of money a family has available to invest has a greater impact on their children’s academic achievement. It should also be noted that “family income is now nearly as strong as parental education in predicting children’s achievement” (Reardon, 2011, p.3).

Although racial minorities are by and large more educated than they were in the past, they still lag behind their white counterparts. The same is true of students from the lowest quintile of the socioeconomic spectrum.

All of this being the case, it is easy to believe that a student’s individual racial and socioeconomic identity has a direct impact on his or her academic success. However, Borman’s (2012) re-examining found nearly the exact opposite: that the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of a student’s *school* is more important than their individual ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status. 1.75 times more important, in fact (Borman 2012).

In 1990, Jencks & Mayer developed the ‘institutional model’ as a means of explaining the reasoning behind this (as cited by Borman, 2012). This model revolves around the resources that the institution has access to. Inequity in institutional resources like per-pupil expenditure, access to experienced teachers, and even varying amounts of parent involvement, were used in this model to predict student outcomes to a high degree of success.

**How on Earth does this relate to the common core?**

Proponents of the Common Core, like Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford Professor and former education adviser to the President, say that the Common Core Standards will improve the chances of the disadvantaged receiving a quality education (as cited in Tampio, 2014) by providing federal funding to well-performing schools. If Borman's data are accurate, and institutional means are more important, it may actually be a better idea to invest in under-performing schools than to admonish them for under-performing.

In fact, underperforming schools are already struggling to adjust to the demands made by the Common Core. A survey by the EPE Research Center found that more than half of teachers believe themselves to be unprepared to teach Common Core Standards to underprivileged/underperforming students (Gewertz, 2013). The same study found that 30% of teachers surveyed had not received any training in the Common Core, and another 30% had only received one day of training. It is reasonable to think that the teachers receiving the most training are the ones in the districts with the most funds available to allocate to such things; i.e. the ones that are least likely to be serving large populations of disadvantaged kids.

And if teacher preparedness isn't enough of a problem, some schools serving underprivileged kids are having doubts about their ability to meet the technological requirements of the Common Core test. Unlike many of the traditional state tests used in the past, the new Common Core exam will be administered via the internet. To prepare, Canby school system in Oregon found it necessary to overhaul their computer set-ups to prepare for testing: installing new computers, and purchasing extra bandwidth (Cavanaugh, 2014). Even with all of the changes, though, the district's Director of

Technology and Innovation, Joe Morelock, suggests that many students will still have to be carefully routed and rotated around their schools during testing, so that they can all access computers within the allotted time (as cited by Cavanaugh, 2014). As of 2011, 17 states had never administered an online test, and though many of these states have been preparing, some districts within may not feel prepared about their ability to handle it (Cavanaugh, 2014).

### **Federal Funding for the Common Core**

In response to this, a proponent of the Common Core would argue that the government is endowing the states that endorse it with extra funding, which might be able to cover the extra costs.

That might have been true, if school funding had not been taking hit after hit over the past several years. After the recession, 13 states cut per-pupil funding for K-12 public education by more than ten percent, adjusted for inflation, and many of the other states that made smaller cuts, or even increased funding, have not seen funding increase enough to overtake the cuts from the last ten or so years (Leachman, 2013). School districts in the affected states have greatly suffered from this, and as many as 324,000 workers in the public education sector have been laid off because of it. Leachman, himself, states that the cuts in funding “undermine education reform” and “hamper [the local government’s] ability to implement” them. Undoubtedly, this would make things like paying \$200 per computer so that schools can upgrade to Windows 7 before Microsoft drops support for Windows XP difficult.

For students in schools and districts that are well-off in terms of resources, technology and teacher training, the Common Core is just a move from one set of

standards to another. For those districts, it may even be a welcome change because the Common Core standards test would allow students and teachers in these areas to garner more support, praise, and confidence in their academic activities, as their successes are compared with the failures of the country's struggling students. This is not to mention the incentive-based funding bumps they will likely receive from their local and state governments for their high performance.

However, for the students and schools that are struggling the most, the implementation of the Common Core Standards might require big changes in the way that funds are allocated.

### **Providing Funds for Needy Schools Is Not a Sin**

However, it is sometimes looked upon as such, and some taxpayers may worry that the money they pay towards Title I funding is taken away by corrupted officials or simply won't make a difference. Paired that with political officials who seek to kill the ever-growing national deficit by cutting funds to education, and the system outputs a severe lack of action regarding funding for public education in the U.S.

This concern is misguided. In 2011, The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) prepared a report in which they detailed how the \$14.5 billion in grants given to Title I school districts in 2010 was spent. Many of the districts selected to receive funding put it towards things like reducing class sizes and training teachers. Most of them, however, put the majority of the money towards salaries and benefits for school teachers and administrators (GAO, 2011). This allows them to attract more experienced and trained academic professionals, who are better equipped to deal with the specific needs of disadvantaged schoolchildren.



Also, the government takes many steps to reduce the possibility of fraud and embezzlement, and to help school systems manage their newly acquired funds. For instance, the Education's Office of Inspector General (OIG) performs frequent audits on school districts, and though there have been a few cases of misuse, the vast majority of the funds were used appropriately (GAO, 2011).

If well funded, schools are able to provide children with the depth and breadth of resources they need to succeed. This is where government intervention can make a real difference. Poverty at home does not have to mean failure at school, but because school resources and community income are so closely intertwined, the system we swear by perpetuates the failure of disadvantaged students. By providing schools that need funding with money to purchase materials or to pay higher salaries to teachers (thus drawing in better talents), all students can experience school as what it should be: a safe-haven for academic exploration and guidance.

### **The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

In March 2014, the Obama Administration submitted their budget request for the U.S. Department of Education's 2015 discretionary funding. This budget would include a 1.9% increase in funding for education, as well as \$28 billion for non-defense discretionary spending, some of which could also end up trickling into the education sector (National Education Association, 2014). Of course, this budget still has to be approved by Congress, but this act alone should result in more discussions within and outside of our government about education, funding, and the Common Core Standards.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of the day, the Common Core as a program is not a bad idea. In fact, if it

had been thought up and implemented at a better time, it may have garnered more affection. After all, the Common Core promises the people of the United States the change that our children need to be successful in school and post-academic life; the change that each and every one of us desire to see. However, due to the current state of the economy and the nation's children, its implementation may cost us more than we receive in change, and greatly devastate those who do not have the good fortune of going to a high-achieving school. Moving forward with the Common Core will require us to work together to fix our injured educational system and ensure that it does more good than harm.

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